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ABSTRACT

Educators should recognize both the special needs of single-parent students and their parents and be aware of child custody laws and the school's responsibility for a child's safety when parents divorce. Such measures as extended care programs and informal discussion between school staff and parents help ensure equal treatment in the education process. (PB)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES
Volume 14/Number 7/August 1983
A component of the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association provided to NSBA Direct Affiliates and EPS subscribers

School systems and the growing minority

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School systems and the growing minority

Statistics show a 64.2 percent increase in their number between 1970 and 1982. The 14 million children affected represent 22 percent—almost one-quarter—of all children under age 18. The Census Bureau estimates that one million additional children will be affected each year.

Need any more clues? Ninety percent of these children only live with their mothers.

You guessed it! They are the children of single-parent families, a growing phenomenon primarily due to divorce or separation, but also composed of children whose mothers never married (currently 2.8 million children), or those affected by death of a parent.

Now that you know how many there are, what else should educators and board members know about these families—and why?

Studies are inconclusive

Unfortunately, studies about the effects of a single-parent household, which is typically a working-mother household, on the educational achievement and emotional development of students reach varying conclusions. For example, the conclusions of a recent National Institute of Education study are uncertain as to the positive or negative effects of working mothers on children. Educational background and work satisfaction of the parent, however, evidently have a positive influence.

That report was followed almost immediately by a Department of Education study which states that children of single-parent families and working mothers score up to nine percentile points lower on standardized tests compared to students whose mothers never worked. In addition, the report concludes that the effect is related directly to how many hours the mother works. But the study also reveals that income level is a factor, with low income students benefiting from the improved home atmosphere provided by the mother's earned income; the extra income provided traditional families when both parents are employed, however, doesn't offset the negative effects of the mother working.

Recognizing special needs

In spite of inconclusive evidence, the growing number and varied lifestyles of single-parent households require that school systems be cognizant of the special needs of these students and their families. Traditional attitudes, activities, and practices may need revising to ensure that schools are responsive to social changes in the community to enable all children to learn effectively.

Responding to changes in family structure can mean, for example, that mail be addressed "to the *family* of . . ." rather than "to the *parents* of . . .," recognizing that not all children live with two parents. School forms, such as emergency care cards, should provide appropriate spaces for separate home and work addresses for *both* parents. Teachers need to be aware that certain assignments may be inappropriate for all students, and principals should be prepared to guide staff in these matters. Asking mothers to chaperone field trips, for instance, or having students make Father's Day cards in art class, are evidence that a teacher doesn't yet recognize that some children don't have a mother or father at home, or that mother may be employed. Ensuring that the attitudes of principals and teachers reflect a contemporary outlook may require inservice training.

Keeping records of family status current also is important to school staff. Teachers should understand that a child's school work or behavior may be linked to changes in family structure, such as a parent moving out. Awareness of such changes in home life often will help a teacher remedy a troubling situation.

According to Sharon Murphy, elementary guidance counselor in the Norwood City School District—a district of 4,000 students surrounded by the City of Cincinnati, teachers want inservice sessions to alert them to the symptoms of emotional problems resulting from a change in the child's home life. Murphy says, "Teachers should recognize that symptoms aren't always negative behaviors. Sometimes a child will work harder in school to achieve perfection, hoping that an excellent report card will effect a reconciliation between the parents."

School systems also should demonstrate their responsiveness to changes in family structure in selecting instructional materials. Textbook review committees, for example, should be on the lookout for illustrations and textual material which ignore the existence of single-parent families and working mothers.

Assisting working parents

Policies and procedures which preclude working parents from direct involvement in their children's education need rethinking and revision. For example, encouraging flexibility in scheduling parent-teacher conferences will benefit working parents. Knowing the work patterns in your community will reveal whether early morning, evening, and/or weekend conference times should be available.

The North Kansas City School District, where approximately 30 percent of the 16,000 students enrolled come from single-parent families, is initiat-

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ing several programs to respond to their special needs. Last year a handbook for single parents and tip sheets for parents and staff were published by the system to help single parents understand their common problems, and to encourage them to be involved in their children's education.

Among the suggestions for staff is to avoid after-school detention which can result in the student having to walk home without the parent's knowledge. The tip sheet for single parents includes the information that the school system will provide bus service to day-care centers on a space-available basis on established routes for a fee. Parents are also advised to encourage their children to participate in school activities because "the sense of accomplishment a group project provides can bolster a feeling of self-worth."

John DeArman, assistant superintendent for instruction, says, "There is a feeling on the part of the board that the system should be responsive and try to break down any barriers between school and home. The board wants to make it convenient, rather than just possible, for all parents to be involved."

To make it convenient the North Kansas City system is willing to spend money. It is providing extended counseling hours one day per week from 2 p.m. until 9 p.m. to enable working parents to schedule appointments. In addition, guidance counselors are being hired for each elementary school, evening classes will be offered single parents to help them cope with their situation, and inservice training for staff will be provided.

According to Connie Marshner, director of the Child and Family Protection Institute of the Free Congress Research and Education Foundation (Washington, D.C.), "One of the most common problems expressed by single working parents is their inability to adequately supervise or be involved in their children's school or after-school activities due to work location." Marshner suggests that schools permit children who live with only one parent to attend school near that parent's workplace. School systems which have revised attendance area policies to permit this flexibility, such as those in Topeka, Kan. and Naples, Fla., usually include the proviso that the parent must provide transportation or that approval is conditioned upon maintaining socioeconomic balance in the schools and availability of space.

School systems also could consider encouraging local businesses to offer flexitime and part-time work arrangements to enable parents to be more available during school hours. As an alternative, or in addition, businesses might be willing to provide release time for employees for school visits or child-related emergencies. An appropriate starting place for a school system to begin discussions on these needs would be through the chamber of commerce or the school system's business advisory council.

Responding to divorce

Divorced parents have special concerns to which schools should respond, especially as they relate to the safety of the student and the rights of the noncustodial parent. For example, schools have to decide how to deal with requests from noncustodial parents to receive meeting notices and other pertinent school information. School administrators especially need guidance about how to respond to requests from these parents to see the child's school records or to remove the child from the school premises.

Most state laws provide specific guidelines, and the federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) essentially states that unless a parent's rights regarding the child are curtailed by court order, both parents have legal rights to participate in the child's education and to see the records. North Kansas City policy states that unless a copy of a court order is on file in the school, the noncustodial parent has full rights regarding seeing the child or the school records. It stipulates, however, that these rights should be exercised according to established procedures, such as scheduling an appointment with the principal.

When questions of which parent has custody arise, administrators should rely on court documents. Ad hoc decisions on the part of administrators may lead to an unfortunate incident. Child snatching is becoming a pervasive problem, and releasing a student to the noncustodial parent may cause blame to fall on the administrator if the child is abducted. Principals should establish any special rights of noncustodial parents with the parent who has custody, and school policy and regulations should delineate precisely how to respond in these situations. To control these situations policy and procedures regarding school visitations, including that all visitors must first go to the school office, are essential.

When circumstances cause a custodial parent to fear the child may be kidnapped by the noncustodial parent, schools should be ready to assist. In these instances it is wise to obtain a photograph of the noncustodial parent to share with all school personnel, including support staff. It also may be prudent to ensure that the child does not leave the classroom unaccompanied or wander away in the playground.

Some school systems are cooperating with local police programs seeking to fingerprint children for assistance in identifying and locating runaway or kidnapped children. The programs are being initiated as a result of the federal Missing Children Act of 1982. In Wisconsin, for example, several school systems have established voluntary fingerprinting programs with the encouragement of the state attorney general. Among them is the Barron School District where administrator Ron Novotny says, "The school district is involved only in the distribution and receipt of parental permis-

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sion slips, and excusing the kids from school to be fingerprinted." The fingerprints are given to the family and not retained by the police or school administration in most communities.

The trend toward joint custody, of course, raises additional problems. If the child in effect has two homes, the school staff faces potentially complex situations if procedures aren't clearly established. Presumably, parents sharing custody have an amicable relationship and are supportive of each other with regard to the child. Nevertheless, the logistics of the situation may interfere with the instructional program. For example, the pressures on a child to remember in which house the math book was left or which parent should sign the permission slip can be stressful and interfere with the learning process. Extra effort on the part of teachers or principal to communicate with both parents may be necessary.

In some cases of joint custody one of the parents eventually may relocate to another city resulting in the student attending two schools. School staff may want to express an opinion about the difficulty of the situation for the student, but those opinions should be based on school policies such as those regarding transferability of credit and sharing of school records with other systems.

Assisting the families

In addition to ensuring that the educational program is responsive to single-parent and working-mother families, school systems sometimes provide additional help to these parents and their children. Deciding how much responsibility for the children of these households belongs to the schools is difficult, and will vary from community to community.

Many school systems provide extended care programs for school children, usually in a joint program with a local social service agency. These programs ensure that children are safe throughout their parent's workday, while giving students an opportunity to do homework, enrich their studies, and develop socially.

Teaching homemaker and survivor skills to young latchkey children is another way of providing children and parents with an increased sense of security. These programs usually are not scheduled during school hours, although aspects can be incorporated into the curriculum, and include such essential information as how to call the police, what to do if an intruder is in the house, how to answer the telephone or doorbell, and how to use the stove. Many people believe these are skills that are best taught at home, but educators know that children often learn skills better in a relaxed peer group.

In addition to learning specific skills, some school systems are responding to concerns about the emotional well-being of children of divorce. Norwood City operates a program, *Children of Divorce,* which was implemented under the leadership of Susan Murphy. As an elementary guidance counselor, Murphy saw a need to respond to the growing numbers of referrals she dealt with that were related to parental separation or divorce. The Norwood program began as a pilot in 1982 in cooperation with Cincinnati's Aring Institute, a private social service organization. The Norwood program is now self-sufficient, with school staff volunteering for training as leaders under Murphy's guidance.

Although Norwood staff can identify most children of divorce from school records, all children receive a letter explaining the program and a parental permission form to take home to avoid differentiating among children. Each group of 8 to 12 youngsters meets once a week for eight weeks either after school, before school, or during lunch period. Since Norwood children walk to school, extracurricular programs of this kind are not difficult to implement.

According to Murphy, the primary goal of the program is to help children realize "I'm not the only one." Through the program children develop their own support system among their peers, which is available to them even after the group sessions are over. The group leaders don't give the children answers, but instead facilitate sharing of concerns and solutions. Children learn coping skills through the process. Relaxation techniques are taught, and some children even teach these techniques to their parents. The children are told not to talk about what is said in the group discussion, although they are encouraged to share their own statements and feelings at home. Apparently the children are respecting each other's privacy.

Research data is not collected to measure the success of the program. Instead Murphy's guages are people's responses. Teachers note improvements in children who participate in the program. Students are eager to sign up for additional sessions. And parents say "thanks for opening the door to communication."

In 1983-84 Norwood's program is expanding to all five of the district's elementary schools, and will be tried in the 7th and 8th grades as well. Two male group leaders will be added to the volunteer program staff, responding to the desire to provide male role models for children who most often live with their mothers. In addition, a program for divorced parents is planned which will include discussions of discipline, communication techniques, and, generally, how to adjust to the single-parent life.

How to get started

Not every community has a large percentage of its students coming from single-parent or working-mother families. Nevertheless, a community with only one such family with special needs should be as responsive as a community with a thousand.

One way to determine the scope of single parent needs in your community is for staff to meet with groups of parents in informal discussions. When the North Kansas City system offered such opportunities to parents in 1980-81, due to the growing concern about the obvious relationship between frequency of student problems and divorce, the response was positive. The range of concerns expressed by parents, from criticism of the term "broken home" to the economic difficulties experienced by many single parents, was a catalyst behind the system's current efforts in reaching out to these families.

Reviewing the school system policy on school-parent relations goals (parents' rights and responsibilities) is another means to ensure that all families are equal partners in the education process. Public discussion of the issues with parents, teachers and community leaders will help determine what specific policies, procedures, and programs are needed in the community, and how the school system can and should respond to those needs. Coordinating efforts with local social service agencies should enable the school system to share the responsibility with the community at large. ■

Trends

Teacher exchange on the home front

Although international teacher exchange programs have been operating for decades, similar programs on a national scale haven't evolved—until now. Tennessee is the innovator of a nationwide teacher exchange program which will begin as a pilot in 1983-84. The plan was developed jointly by the state education department and the Tennessee Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Only Tennessee and Connecticut are actively participating in the first year, but it is expected that at least six, and perhaps as many as 15, additional states will join the network in 1984-85.

Why Exchange?

According to Judith Anderson, director of special projects for the Tennessee education department, the program has several objectives:

- to inject new ideas, teaching strategies, and enthusiasm into the classroom since less teacher hiring and movement has resulted in longer tenure of current teachers;
- to offset teacher burnout for those who have been teaching in the same grade level, school, or system too long by providing them with new challenges and a psychological boost;
- to broaden the knowledge and perspective of teachers who have lived in one place all their lives and who have traveled infrequently, or not at all.

Teachers have the opportunity to exchange a rural setting for an urban one, a small system for a large one, or simply to experience living in a different region of the country.

The Plan in Action

Although 14 teachers originally applied for exchange positions, the pilot program involves only two special education resource teachers from Connecticut and Tennessee who are directly exchanging positions. When the program expands to include more states and teachers it likely will encompass more cross exchanges. Teachers may still prefer, however, to have a one-on-one swap which could more easily include exchange of housing, car and other necessities. Since teachers continue to be paid by their home districts (with no reimbursement for relocation expenses), differences in cost of living can be offset when such housing and transportation arrangements are made. On an informal basis, receiving school systems are requested to assist exchange teachers seeking housing and other amenities.

The Tennessee plan is open to teachers appropriately certified in their home states. Coordination is provided by state departments of education, but approval of each teacher's application and placement are the responsibility of the school systems directly involved.

Plans are being developed for evaluating the pilot program. Under consideration are surveys of the exchange teachers, principals from each of the exchange schools, and fellow teachers. Several state superintendents, including those in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Iowa, and North Dakota, are awaiting the evaluations before joining the program in its second year.

Be Prepared

Before announcing exchange program opportunities to teachers a thorough check should be made of any state or local legal restrictions which may conflict with the specific program's administration. A Kentucky statute, for instance, mandates that all teachers be paid by the school in which they work, a direct conflict with the Tennessee program's plan in which the exchange teacher is paid by the original employer.

Questions relating to teacher liability should also be reviewed. For example, the question of a teacher's liability in a student injury case when the teacher's salary is paid by another state arose during planning of the Tennessee program. Education department counsel advised that wording should be included in the contract stating that the teacher will abide by the rules and will accept liability according to the system in which the individual is *working*. While Tennessee law may permit this mechanism, that may not be the case nationwide and advice from local legal authorities is recommended. It is possible that resolution of this question will require state legislation.

The Board's Role

In addition to reviewing legal questions, a board policy on teacher exchange should be adopted. Many systems already have such policies related to foreign exchange programs, and it may be possible to revise wording to include any type of exchange program. The purpose of the policy is to protect both the teacher and the school system, and such protections should be established *before* commitments are made.

The teacher exchange policy should include: endorsement of the value of teacher exchange programs; prerequisites for applying, such as years of service and certification; guarantees that the teacher can return to his present position; protection of salary schedule, benefits program, and tenure; guidelines on the permitted number of exchange teachers per year and/or per school; and any restrictions on future leaves, such as additional years of service required. Guidelines related to the visiting teacher should also be included, such as the availability of inservice opportunities and criteria for termination of the exchange contract.

In Tennessee there are currently no controls imposed on the exchange teacher, other than word of honor, with regard to commitment to return to the home system. It would be wise, however, to include in the policy some insurance for the home system. In addition to the teacher's rights, the policy should include any responsibilities the teacher is expected to fulfill following the exchange. For example, the policy could contain reference to the basic commitment to return (perhaps for a minimum designated time period), and the means for sharing experiences with other teachers. ■

Tips 'n Techniques

Getting the school year started

Teachers have been hired or reassigned. New students have been registered at their appropriate schools. Bus schedules have been designed. Necessary supplies and equipment have been ordered. *The public information program is in full gear.*

These are all essential tasks that need to be done every year before the opening of school. Too often, however, the need for a public information program at the start of the school year is not obvious, and has not been included in the annual management calendar. But a critical aspect of getting the school year started smoothly is providing students, parents, staff, and the community at large with standard information on school operations.

What are the components of an effective public information program for the start of a new school year?

Systemwide Efforts

First, make sure that current and complete policy manuals are widely available. Usually school systems keep policy manuals in the superintendent's office *and* in each school building office or library. In addition, school systems often place policy manuals in community libraries to increase accessibility for the public.

Distributing the manuals, however, is only the first step. The community needs to know that the manual is available, and the kind of information contained in it. The local news media can help by printing a story about the opening of school. Story material can be provided by the school system's public relations office, including information about the availability and importance of the policy manual. A school system press release could highlight selected information, such as the school calendar, medical requirements for school attendance, and phone numbers of school board members and school system offices.

But don't rely on the local media alone. The school system also should publish a systemwide information sheet to mail to all school families and libraries. Since many students visit doctor and dentist offices in the month preceding school, medical offices may be appropriate places for this information to be available as well. The sheet also could include information about community use of school facilities, policies on school visitation and parent-teacher conferences, and procedures for complaint.

School Activities

To be thoroughly responsive to anticipated community needs, and to decrease unnecessary questions for school personnel, each school should publish handbooks for students and parents. In addition to the school calendar, these handbooks should contain policy information on students rights and responsibilities, behavior and dress codes, suspension and expulsion criteria, the grading and promotion system, lateness and absentee regulations, and homework guidelines. At the secondary level they also should include information on the guidance department, requirements for graduation, and information on extracurricular opportunities.

The parents' handbook could duplicate that for students in many respects, but also should contain information on school visitations and conferences, availability of student records, grievance procedures, opportunities for school volunteers, and the availability of a parent organization if one exists.

The procedure for complaints should be clearly stated for parents. They need to know the "chain of command" in your community as stated in your policy. Too often parents direct complaints to the superintendent or school board member before discussing the issue with the teacher or principal. Everyone's job is easier when established procedures are followed, but the community must know what those procedures are.

In some communities the PTA or local parent organization takes the initiative to write and/or sponsor the parent handbook; the principal must check the publication for accuracy. Sometimes, especially at the elementary level, the handbook includes student addresses (check legal restrictions first). Others take the opportunity to provide parents with information about child development as it relates to the particular age group. In addition, some handbooks include valuable information on childhood diseases and substance abuse, and names and telephone numbers of local social service agencies and programs.

Staff Needs

Every staff member should receive upon hiring a personnel policy handbook, and revised editions as necessary. Although staff negotiated agreements may cover some important information, such as contract hours, evaluation policies and regulations, grievance procedures, staff development opportunities, and absence and leave policies, the staff handbook could repeat appropriate sections of the contract. In systems where boards do not negotiate contracts these policy statements should be included in the staff handbook. In both instances, staff responsibilities regarding parent conferences and extracurricular duties, discipline, homework, restrictions on classroom materials and/or subject matter, grading, and other classroom activities also should be covered.

At the start of each school year principals should review important policies and regulations with the entire staff, and make known the availability of the complete policy manual in the school building. Special attention should be given to any policies or regulations which have been added, deleted, or revised recently.

Although there is no guarantee that students, parents or staff will retain the information the school system provides, they will have a substantial amount of information to refer to as needed. By providing the information the school system will improve communication and enhance understanding of school policies and regulations—goals worth achieving. ■

More on teacher exchange

Teacher exchange opportunities aren't only international or national in scope. In Fairfax County, Va., an intra-system exchange program is planned for the 1983-84 school year. The voluntary staff development program is not literally an exchange program since any opening, e.g. due to teacher retirement or staff expansion, is a potential placement opportunity.

The program has been designed and is being implemented under the guidance of Area Superintendent Arthur W. Gosling, who administers one of four subdivisions in the 120,000-student school system. Only Area IV staff and schools, which Gosling administers, are involved in the program.

Program benefits

Gosling points out several benefits of the staff development opportunity, including working with a new group of professional colleagues; experiencing the leadership of a principal whose style and emphasis may be different; teaching in a different arrangement, such as team teaching; and breaking old habits while being challenged by a new environment. Teachers are guaranteed full retention of seniority rights in the teacher's current building, and the opportunity to change positions permanently following the exchange year if both the teacher and principal at the new location so request.

Placement process

Of the sixty-one applicants from 29 Area IV schools, 23 placements are approved, with teachers placed only in schools and positions (e.g. grade level, reading teacher) requested on their applications. The placement process includes detailed review and recommendations by personnel department and senior Area IV staff members, and sharing of recommendations with principals in a workshop format.

According to Gosling the success of the placement process is dependent on the credibility between principals regarding a teacher's effectiveness. Principals do not view the program as a backdoor opportunity to transfer a marginally poor teacher.

Placements are more easily achieved for teachers seeking to continue in similar positions in other buildings than for those seeking to "move up" to higher grade level or specialist positions, as well as for teachers who provide more alternatives on their applications, i.e. grade levels, specific school buildings. Of the 23 approved placements, 17 are in similar teaching assignments, such as high school English position to high school English position; four elementary teachers are placed in intermediate or high school positions; and two teachers are exchanging general education positions for specialist assignments. Twenty-seven of the 38 applicants not placed were seeking positions at higher grade levels where insufficient openings exist.

Future plans

Gosling is certain the program will benefit teachers, principals, and students. He is recommending that it continue in 1984-85, and remain within the area rather than expand systemwide. He views the high trust level among principals who work closely together during the school year as a crucial factor in the success of the placement process. If the program extended beyond area lines the integrity of that trust could be damaged.

To improve the program Gosling wants better coordination with the system's voluntary transfer calendar, and earlier identification of potential staff vacancies due to teacher retirement. Other improvements may result from a planned survey of the first participants. ■

For more policy help

Sample policies and exhibits relating to the topics covered in this month's *Updating* are included in the school administrator's copy of this publication. These are:

School-Parent Relations: KAB*, School-Parent Relations Goals; IKAD, Parent Conferences.

Starting the School Year: KB, Public Information Program; CHC, Regulations Dissemination; CHCA, Approval of Handbooks and Directives.

Teacher Exchange: GCQC, Exchange Teaching.

Additional sample policies, regulations, or exhibits on these and other topics may be requested from the EPS Policy Information Clearinghouse, NSBA, 1055 Thomas Jefferson St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

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